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StreetSpace

A Method for saving the Cathedral Quarter in Belfast

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Synopsis

Local mixed-use streets are at the core of urban life. The twentieth century saw a radical transformation and destruction of many of these streets. Since the 1990s, practice followed 1960s scholarship in a return to valuing local mixed-use streets, but they are still under threat by large-scale urban development.

The StreetSpace project studies this phenomenon since 2013, exploring ways of understanding local mixed-use streets as public spaces through the lenses of different disciplines, **driven by architectural analysis**.

This paper will explain the significance of local mixed-use streets and the synergies developed between the StreetSpace project in Belfast and the SaveCQ campaign, which advocates to defend the Cathedral Quarter's 'historical importance, distinct character, and current prominence as the beating heart of Northern Ireland's arts and cultural scene'.

Key words: Streets; public spaces; urban analysis; urban methods; architecture.

1. Introduction

'A sidewalk life arises only when the concrete, tangible facilities it requires are present. (...) If they are absent, public sidewalk contacts are absent too.' (Jacobs 1961, p92)

Local mixed-use streets contain retail, services, production, leisure and residential uses. They gradually adapt to change and promote the integration of different cultures. Academics and urban designers have recognised their value for decades (Jacobs 1961, Whyte 1980, Vernez Moudon 1987, Mantho 2014, Gehl 2012, Vikas Mehta 2013). However, increasingly car- and retail-led redevelopment, threatens to transform them quickly and radically turning them into placeless streets (Cresswell 2015, Harvey 2012, Relph 1976). Placeless redevelopment displaces residents and traders; privatises public spaces, and sets boundaries to the expression and experience of culture. Scholars are therefore focusing on strategies that highlight their environment, their material culture and the significance for the public (Hubbard 2017, Vaughan 2015, Cranz 2016, Zukin 2012, Degen and Rose, 2012). The best way to tackle this problem is to begin by understanding what those local mixed-use streets are and why they are valuable.

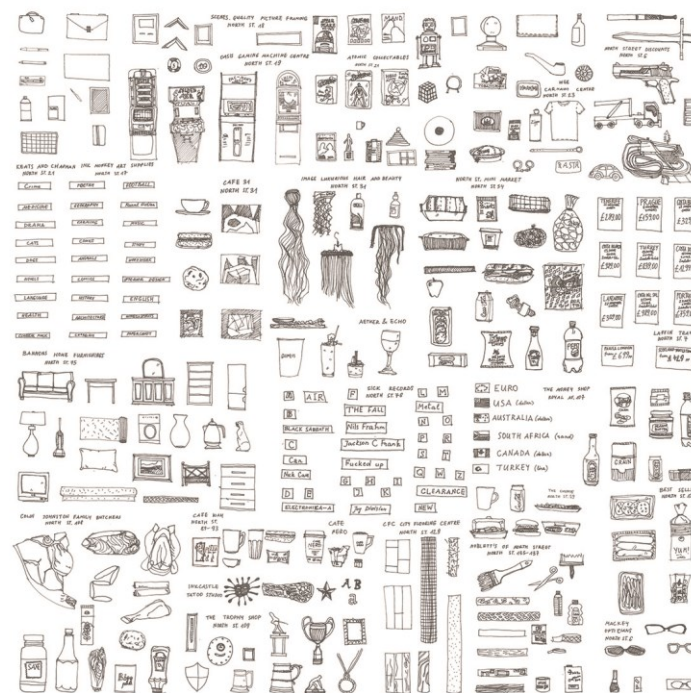


Figure 1. Products sold on North Street - by Milda Paceviciute.

2. StreetSpace research and methods

The multidisciplinary research and practice-based nature of this project is developing ways to shed light into the changing nature of local mixed-use streets from academic, policy and practice perspectives. We look for ways to analyse and understand the social and cultural significance of local mixed-use streets. Through a series of workshops and case studies we explore local mixed-use streets by combining specific tools of built environment, humanities and social sciences. We aim to understand the way in which the urban form of

mixed-use streets relates to how they are experienced, and their process of slow transformation. We map the physical environment in detail; and study the use, occupation and experience of that environment from the planner's, developer's and user's perspective. This project provides a broader way of understanding, planning and developing mixed-use streets.

The streets that we analyse are city centre, local mixed-use streets, with a mix of retail, leisure, services, offices and housing. They have a recent past of cultural diversification and are at risk of large-scale redevelopment. Each street is studied through three lenses:

- Histories, through archive material and current interviews, to explore the use, occupation and transformation of local mixed-use streets.
- Perceptions, through interviews and surveys of shop owners, inhabitants, users, planners and developers to understand use, occupation and sense of place
- Aspirations, through urban plans, policy and town centre management in the last 40 years to understand the top down initiatives of Street Spaces.

All layers of analysis are supported with a thorough understanding of the physical environment of the street. This provides visual tools for the process of analysis.



Figure 2. Commercial uses - by Conal Casey and Jack Knights.



Figure 3. Buildings in North Street demolished December 2016 - by Callum Black.

3. Belfast Case Study: North Street and SaveCQ

North Street in Belfast City Centre is one of the streets affected by current and potential large-scale development. It has a significant nineteenth and twentieth century built fabric, but much of its top floors are in disuse and vacant. The shops cater for a broad diversity of uses, from bookshops to grocery stores and from galleries to tattoo shops. There are some very valuable buildings and uses, and despite the presence of a few large parking lots, the area still has a strong sense of place. Unfortunately, a series of valuable but unlisted buildings have been recently demolished. Despite the efforts of a series of not for profit organisations, current legislation in Northern Ireland seems unable to protect the heritage of local mixed use streets.

The Royal exchange project, which includes North Street as its main thoroughfare, presents retail and office-led, generic and homogenous development with little participation of the public. Despite this area's historical importance, distinct character, and current prominence as the beating heart of Northern Ireland's arts and cultural scene, the proposals are for widespread demolition, replacing independent businesses and arts organisations with generic retail & offices.

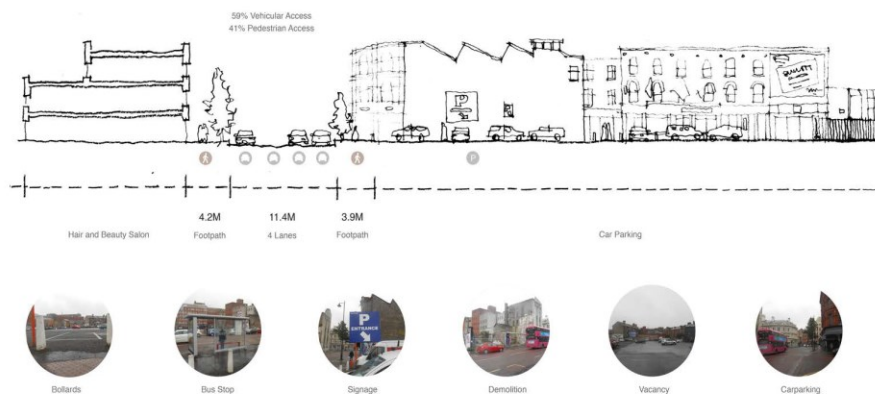


Figure 4. Street Section - by Mark Donnelly.

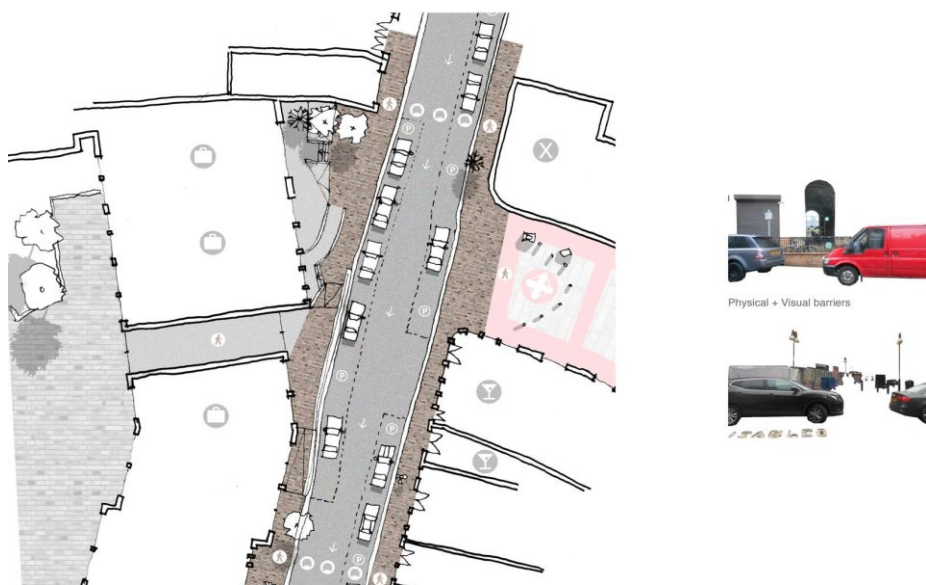


Figure 4. North Street Junction - by Mark Donnelly.

SaveCQ was founded in February 2017 as a campaign to highlight the value and significance of the area. Save CQ is a voluntary organisation, independent of any political or commercial interests, and acts out of a desire to see this city flourish by retaining and nurturing the character that makes it distinctive.

The StreetSpace design studio developed since September 2017 as an architecture/planning design studio to give alternatives to the proposed Royal exchange scheme. It aims to develop North Street as a lively street, inclusive of different types of citizens, that is aware of its roots, its past, its history and its culture, a city made by and for its citizens. All this is done through an architectural understanding of good quality spaces that are inclusive and accessible.

Save CQ and StreetSpace have been working together to defend the value and significance of North Street and will continue using this method of analysis and proposals to inform the development of similar streets in Belfast and beyond.

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Biography

Agustina Martire. Lecturer in Architecture at Queen's University Belfast. Agustina studied architecture at Universidad de Buenos Aires. She is specialised in urban history and theory. She received her PhD at TU Delft on the history of Urban Leisure Waterfronts and worked as a post-doctoral researcher in UCD Dublin. She is currently leading StreetSpace, an international project on the analysis of streets as public spaces, from a multidisciplinary perspective, which sheds light on the way urban spaces are used and represented. She runs a design studio unit in MArch focused on street analysis and runs the fifth year humanities dissertation and third year history and theory module.